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ABSTRACT

A writing course (adapted from Eliot Wigginton's "Foxfire" method) for college freshmen and sophomores is taught in a way that is not only important to the students concerned but to their community--a valley in the "rust belt" of Pennsylvania--as a whole. The course differs from the usual writing-in-the-social-sciences course in three ways: (1) students work with three historical topics that are closely tied to their locale; (2) the students use primary materials (diaries, letters, scrapbooks, quilts, original maps and drawings); and (3) the students view themselves as professional writer-editors and act accordingly. The course is taught each fall with editing in the spring and publication in the summer of an annual soft-cover compilation. Early in the course, students are taught how to conduct interviews. Classes deal with group editing of students' articles and grammar review. A few classes are devoted to viewing a series of films, followed by discussion. After the semester is over, articles to be published are selected by the instructor with the help of volunteer student editors. The course is successful--the community feels good about preserving local history, the students begin to value their community, and families are sometimes brought together as they share memories and family history. (A flyer describing the course, the syllabus, a student questionnaire, and a publication release form are attached.) (RS)

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Writing across the Curriculum: How-To Plan for a "Writing-in-the-Social Sciences" Class That Works

Claudia A. Limbert

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Claudia A. Limbert

Writing across the Curriculum: A How-To Plan for a "Writing-in-the-Social Sciences" Class That Works

We have all seen it happen. You hand back some graded essays, and the students quickly glance at their grades and toss their papers into the wastepaper basket on the way out of the classroom door. Obviously, the experience of having written this paper and, indeed, the paper itself means nothing at all to these students.

For some time now, I have been concerned about what I'd term a sense of disassociation between a student's work as a scholar and a student's real-life experience. I believe that there is a way to bring these two facets of a student's life closer together. Currently, I am teaching our "English 202A: Writing-in-the-Social Sciences" course in a way that appears to be not only important to the students concerned but to our community – a valley in the rust belt of Pennsylvania – as a whole. Adapting Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire method to the needs of our particular college students, I have developed a writing course for college freshmen and sophomores that works.

This course differs from the usual "writing-in-the-social-sciences" course in three ways.

First, each student will be working with three historical topics that are closely tied to our own people and to our own locale. These topics may or may not have made the history books but are topics which have a personal significance for the students. Whether the topics might be better categorized as traditional history, social history, or popular culture, the topics must have a local slant and might include such topics as documented ghost stories, the Underground Railroad of Pennsylvania, business or church histories, war memoirs, histories of local minority or ethnic groups, the story of a local point of interest such as an old house or a covered bridge, the make-do recipes of the Great Depression, our local Amish population, or such subjects as how to keep bees, plant by the moon, or shoe a horse.

Second, the students will be working not only with secondary historical materials (the ones more usually utilized in such a course) but will learn how to use primary materials such as diaries, letters, scrapbooks, quilts, original maps and drawings – whether found in the students'

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own attics or in more conventional archives – as well as word-of-mouth reports.

Third, students are asked not to view themselves as students; rather, they are asked to view themselves as professional writer-editors and to act accordingly. This results in their becoming self-starters and harder on themselves (and the other students) than the instructor would ever dare to be. Such a professional focus increases the students' ability to become leaders as well as team members as they talk over and assign topics and hone their articles/papers with a keen awareness of their audience's needs and desires. This focus also intensifies their ability to edit one another's work with the final goal being the publication of a minimum of one of their three articles in our annual soft-cover publication The Present Past.

Before I present the how-to information about this course, I would like to sketch its background.

In the fall of 1989, a colleague of mine who usually taught the honors section of our "Rhetoric and Composition" class went on sabbatical, and I was asked to take his place. There were only seven students in the honors section that semester and, although I knew that I wanted them to write Foxfire-like papers on local topics, I really had no idea how the course was going to work. I was totally honest with the students about this, and they rose to the occasion. This vulnerability on the part of their instructor seemed to cause them to pull together as they helped shape the new course into one that was student-oriented as well as curriculum-oriented.

It was only when we were about halfway through the semester that it suddenly dawned on me that, if all the articles were as well written as the ones that I had been getting, then those articles should be preserved some way. A publication seemed to be the answer. At that point, I approached our campus' CEO and our Director of Academic Affairs who promised to pull together money from several funds to cover our printing costs.

The goal of historic preservation through a publication fixed firmly in their minds, my seven students labored on, often with me anxiously standing over them as we tried to figure things out as we went along. At one point, someone mentioned that we would need a title for our new publication, so the class decided to hold a campus-wide contest with a Penn State sweat-shirt as the prize. We got many entries including one muttered under his breath by one of those same honors students – "The Project from Hell" –

which "we" decided not to use in favor of the winning title The Present Past. Then someone said, "What are we going to use for a cover?" So, a similar contest got us a cover designed by one of our art students. We decided to use the same cover with every issue á la Foxfire, just changing the color each year.

That second fall, my colleague returned from sabbatical, and I took the project into the composition class on "Writing in the Social Sciences." An interesting thing happened. Since the project was now covered by a new course number, I found several of the seven original students legitimately enrolled again in the class. When I asked them why they wanted to repeat the experience, they said, "We have some more important stories that need to be preserved in print."

By the third year, the class was well established, and I had lost that frantic feeling that a new course can sometimes bring. Better yet, word about the class had gotten around to the rest of the students, and the class was filled to its maximum number of twenty-four students as it is again this year.

So, how does this course work?

The course is taught each fall with editing in the spring and publication in the summer. Each fall class is composed of twenty-four freshmen or sophomore students who have already taken their foundation "Rhetoric and Composition" course. Typically on our very non-traditional campus, the students range in age from an early-admissions student of sixteen or seventeen to one of our "Go-Sixty" program participants of perhaps seventy or eighty. These "Go-Sixty" students often find themselves being fought over as valuable resources for the younger students. As one woman of eighty-five said, "I have never been so popular in my life."

On the first day of the fall class, we go over the syllabus, reviewing the rules and expectations for the class. Since I want the students to quickly begin thinking of possible topics, some time is spent glancing through the textbooks. The first time I taught this course, I used Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1973), Studs Terkel's Hard Times: An Oral History (New York: Pantheon, 1986), and Ronald Blythe's Akenfield: A Portrait of an English Village (New York: Pantheon, 1980). However, if I had the first year to do over again, I might try a series of excerpts from published diaries, journals, books of letters, oral histories,

biographies, and autobiographies. University presses with popular culture departments usually offer several good choices.

Since that first year, I have continued to use Foxfire 3, the inspiration for the course, but now the students are also using the previous two editions of our own Present Past volumes as texts. Indeed, the students unanimously prefer the Present Pasts to any other readings that I have given them, probably because the articles are important to them and, since they know some of the writers, they have the immediate feeling of "Well, if she can write an article like that, then so can I." This gives the students a positive mindset. Other readings are on reserve in the library: very old local newspapers or newspapers focusing on the centennials or bicentennials of towns, articles about doing oral history, the other Foxfire books, and miscellaneous materials on local history. These are frequently consulted or used as reference sources by the students.

But, to return to that first class, I leaf through the textbooks, mentioning some of the articles and talking a little about them. I always make a point of saying that being printed somewhere doesn't mean that a piece is either well written or properly documented. In other words, the groundwork is being laid at this first class for it to be okay for the students to say that a piece – either by a published writer or a fellow student – is poorly done as long as that commentator is prepared to defend this position with specific suggestions for improvement.

I would like to note that, at this first class, a certain amount of cheerleading on the part of the instructor is necessary. Enthusiasm is catching. I keep moving around the classroom, never standing behind the lectern, as I tell them that we are attempting to capture local history of all kinds – the kind of stories that have an historical importance as well as a local tie-in, but the kind of thing that might not be "important" enough to make it into a standard college history text. I make a point of telling them about people whom we have already interviewed who have since died or who have become so debilitated that they are no longer able to remember their stories. I also tell them about a house fire that destroyed one family's records shortly after an article had been written using some of those records. I do this because the students need to realize how very important their work will be.

Finally, at this same class, I not only leaf through the textbooks, talking about stories and places and events that might interest them, but I also bring in what one of the original students labelled "The Box." "The Box" is a dumping ground for articles from local papers, old pictures of people or or the area, lists of unused ideas for possible topics, and lists of people who might have a good story to share. 'The Box" is an on-going collection contributed to by students, faculty, staff, Advisory Board members, alumni, friends, and family members. I pull things out at random, circulating them throughout the classroom.

At the same time that I am holding up the texts and discussing the bits and pieces in "The Box," I ask the students to mentally brainstorm topics, writing them down on a piece of paper as they think of them.

With any luck, by the end of the first period, the students are batting ideas back and forth with one another and with me and are feeling optimistic about their ability to do what they need to do. At that point, the class ends, and I send them home with a form to fill out.

First, the form asks for some writerly information about each student: "What is your writing background?" "Do you like to write and – if so – what?" "Have you ever worked on a writing project before such as a class yearbook, church bulletin, or school newspaper?" "Have you ever published anything?" I ask whether they are able to take photographs (a big help for students who can't but who might like to have a photograph to accompany an article) or do detailed, to-scale drawings.

On this same form are a couple of questions that are designed to give the students some ideas for topics: "Do you have any particular interests in cooking, hunting and camping skills, music, farming, logging, automobiles, trains, architecture, crafts, or ethnic social clubs that you would like to develop?". "Are you interested in any particular historical topic that you might like to consider further: The mills, labor or union history, medical history, aviation history, etc.?"

My final question is: "Why are you taking this course?" I find that their reasons vary greatly. A few students are brutally honest, saying that they need a course like this to fulfill an academic requirement or that they got closed out of their first choice. Some will say that they want to record some element of local or family history. However, now that the course is in its fourth year, I find that more and more of them are saying things like

these students did: "I heard from my friends who had taken this course that it is a really hard course and that you expect a lot out of your students, but I also heard that it was fun and was important work to do. I am sick of just doing busywork in my writing classes." "My Grandpa recently died, and I am afraid that I will forget him and not be able to tell my own children someday about how special he was. I want to write down everything that I know about him." "Until I read one of the Present Pasts, I always figured that the Valley stunk and that I wanted to get the hell out of it as soon as I could. Now, I am beginning to question this decision and would like the chance to find out more about the Valley and my people."

That evening, while the students are at home completing their questionnaires, they are asked to attach to it that list of possible topics which they began in class, adding as many other topics as they can think of and doing no self-editing at this stage.

At the second class, after appointing a student to record everything on paper as a record, I begin going around the room from student to student, assigning topics to each person and writing those topics on the board. Typically, the students tentatively mention several possible topics, and I encourage the rest of the class to help them decide which topic might work best. The students and I ask questions which become easier as the semester progress, such questions as: "What resource materials could you use for this piece?" "How do you plan to verify the verbal information that you will get?" "Do you think this would appeal to a wide audience--our target?" "Why would someone want to read this?" "Do you have access to any photographs or other material for an illustration?" "Do you need information that one of us could supply or a personal connection that we could help you make?" Over this class period, we watch the first set of articles take shape before our eyes on the board – a good motivator.

At the next class, I check briefly to make sure that all is proceeding well and then there is a fairly straightforward lecture – one of the very few in the course – on how to get a good interview. You can either teach this element of the course yourself or invite a guest lecturer from your Speech Department. At the conclusion of that period, I ask the students to bring several possible interview questions to the next class, mentioning that they may decide to totally discard some or all of of these questions at the actual interview so as to pursue a more interesting line of conversation.

This list of possible questions will form the basis for an interview with one of the other students in the class.

The next two classes are devoted to interviewing one another. Each student is paired with another student who is as different in age and background as I can manage. The students takes turns interviewing one another with the objective being one-paragraph bios to go into the "Contributors" section at the end of the completed edition. They are asked to check and recheck their facts and cut their teeth on group editing – an important element of the course – by allowing the other person to help them edit their work. This will be their first graded assignment. They almost always do extremely well with this writing assignment and, once again, this experience establishes a positive, I-can-do-this atmosphere.

The students are required to write three articles – some will do four or five – and each article must be a minimum of five pages and properly documented and typed. The students do not actually do any writing in class, only group editing of one another's work. The rationale behind the group editing is that the students not only learn to participate more actively in class and to work as a team, but they more readily see someone else's mistakes before they are far enough along as writers to see their own. Yet, by the end of the course, I find that each student's editing ability has been completely extended to his or her own work in a way that I have not found possible in other, more conventional writing courses.

While many of our classes are taken up with group editing, some classes become either impromptu or scheduled grammar review sections. For example, after the students turn in their first articles, I look for common writing problems and then make up a series of overheads of examples that are drawn from their papers but heavily disguised. The students are given xeroxed copies of these overheads, and we systematically work through them together, often with lively arguments breaking out over grammar questions. Often at these sessions, other useful grammar or writing questions will come to the students' minds, and they usually feel free to ask them.

Throughout the semester, a few classes are devoted to viewing a series of films, both long and short, followed by discussion. The films tend to stimulate the students, giving them some new ideas and approaches to their topics. This semester, I am using The Johnstown Flood, The Amish: A

People of Preservation, Aunt Arie, Ruth Stout's Garden, Myths and Moundbuilders, Sam Daggett's House, and The Shakers. The film list changes every year that I teach the class as I locate new films or tire of old ones.

Several class are either devoted to walking tours to an old vaudeville theater that is being restored, a local mansion, or perhaps to a firm making lead crystal items the old-fashioned way. Several classes are devoted to van-oriented field trips that might take us to a local historical society, a museum, or – when funds permit it – to have lunch together at a restaurant located in an historic building of interest.

Other classes sprinkled throughout the semester focus on our readings and, in particular, upon several writerly concerns. For example, some clusters of readings help the students consider from a professional writer-editor point of view how to incorporate interviews into a paper, how to use typographical and spatial effects in shaping an article, how to put together a how-to article, how to properly cite information drawn from various sources, and how to make an article that seems dead on the page come alive and become memorable to the reader.

Although the students enjoy the editing sessions, the film-oriented classes, the field trips, and the classes devoted to examining our readings, their favorite classes are the ones that the students themselves are responsible for setting up – a series of classroom lectures given by so-called "ordinary people" from our community. These guest lectures are also advertised around campus and draw in other students, many of whom later decide to take this class themselves. Some of our classroom visitors have included a woman of Blackfoot descent who talked to us about her people, a woman who played the dulcimer, a man who is one of the last survivors of the Bataan Death March, a man who spoke about the old Erie Canal, a bagpiper, two men who are active in reenacting Civil War battles and who came into our classroom in full uniform, and a man who plays the tamburitza and asked to bring a "couple of friends" who turned out to be a semi-professional troop of eighteen tamburitza players and dancers who had the entire class on their feet and dancing by the end of the hour.

By this point in the semester, the course is almost over. Since the students have a two-week period after the return of their graded papers to revise and retype them for consideration in our next volume of The Present Past, I have a large folder full of possibilities By this point, each student

has also signed a publishing release that was designed by one of the original students in the honors group, a certified paralegal. Basically, this release gives Penn State permission to print the listed articles and any accompanying materials. (I have already asked the students to have anyone whom they interviewed write a statement at the bottom of the article concerning them that they have given their permission for everything in the article to be published.) The release also gives Penn State only first publishing rights and, after our publication, those rights are returned to the student.

When the semester is over and the dust has cleared somewhat, I still have three things to do. First, either by myself or with the help of volunteer student editors, I must select the articles that will be published. I look for articles that are well written, well documented, and that will appeal to a wide audience of general readers. I try to include one article from each student but refuse to compromise the quality or integrity of the publication by including poorly done pieces. The second thing is to make sure that the funding is still in place. Funding, in our case, is covered by several budgets with the majority coming from Student Enhancement funds. Funding could also be handled by grants or by selling advertising space, such selling either being part of the writing class' activities or farmed out to a business class as a hands-on, fund-raising project. At last, everything in place, the final thing that must be done is to take the copy to our printer, a member of our Advisory Board who believes in the project enough to give us a good price on our printing, and to proofread the resultant galleys, hopefully helped by some of the students.

Having considered the nuts and the bolts of doing such a project, I would like to conclude that it has been enormously successful.

First of all, more than academic issues are concerned here. For example, our entire community feels good about it, and people actually volunteer to be interviewed. Too, students who were previously very vocal about hating this geographical region and feeling that nothing ever happened here and that the Valley's people never did anything important have completely changed their minds and now value the Valley and its people. Additionally, this project brings families together as they share memories and family history, often for the first time as when a former soldier felt that he was finally able to share his horrifying World War II experience with his great-grandchild. Another nice bonus is that all of our proceeds go to the

scholarship fund at our campus, a campus located, as I mentioned earlier, in Pennsylvania's rust belt, an area currently in a state of economic depression due to massive layoffs at the steel mills. The students take great pride in being able to help their fellow students in this way. Finally – and something to stress when you go from office to office on campus with your hand out for funding – such a project is extremely valuable as an outreach effort to the community. Our public relations specialist makes sure that the class remains very visible to the news media, and I am often asked to speak about the project to local civic organizations or to groups of prospective students.

Yet, although all of these aspects of the course are extremely important, what is personally most important for me as a teacher has nothing to do with any of the above. What is important for me is that, not only are we preserving local history but, at last, I have found a way to teach a writing class where the students never throw a paper into the wastepaper basket on their way out of the classroom door.

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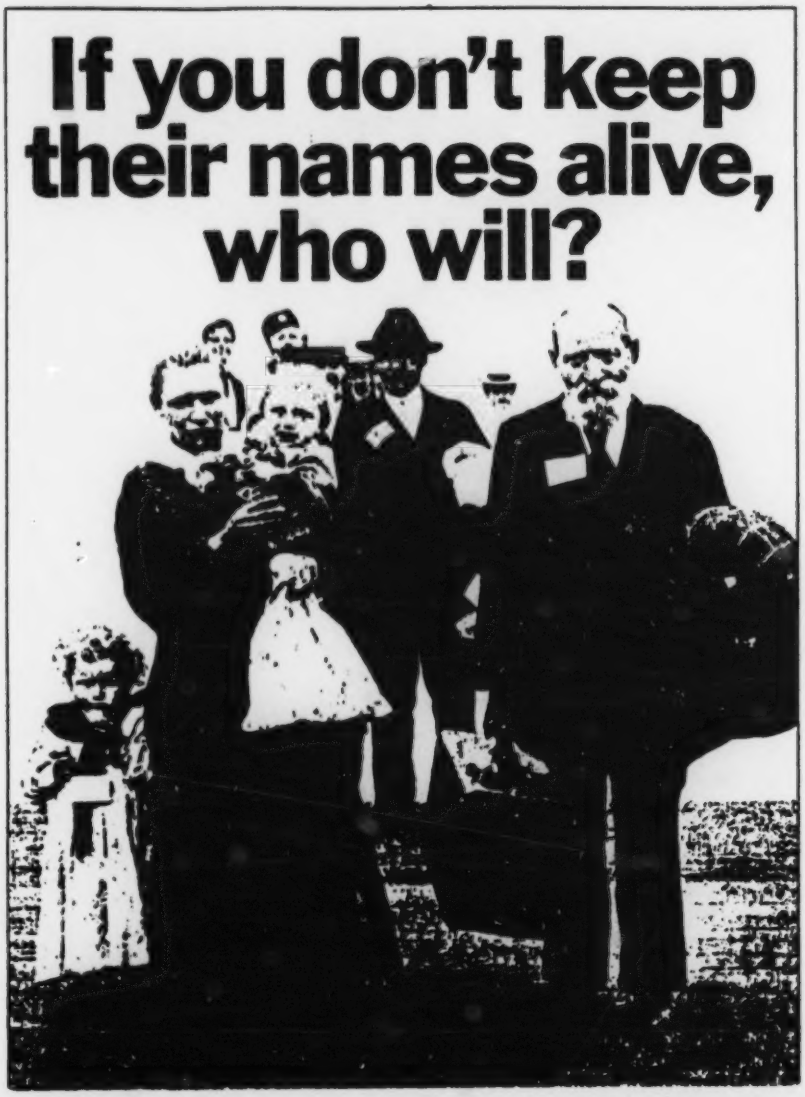
ENGLISH 202A
WRITING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES



If you're interested in family, local, ethnic, or church history or if you would like to preserve on paper old music, customs, recipes, crafts, skills, or legends, then join us for an innovative approach to "Writing in the Social Sciences." In this class, drawing upon your particular interests, you will capture on paper those parts of your own history—both family and community—that are rapidly being lost. Using the Foxfire method to interview family members and local residents, you will work one-on-one with the instructor as well as with your peers in a comfortable, non-threatening workshop setting as you write professional quality articles to be considered for publication in The Present Past.

Dr. Limbert
MWF 11:00-11:50
SU 303
3 Credits--GWS

Prerequisite: English 15

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Dr. Limbert (SH 308)
Office Hours: MWF 9:00 - 10:00
3:00 - 4:00
and by appointment

English 202A
Fall 1992
MWF 11:00 - 11:50
SH 303

TEXTS:

In the bookstore, please purchase Foxfire 3 and issues 2 and 3 of The Present Past. We will model our efforts as social scientists particularly on The Present Past volumes which were produced by the students on our campus and which concern the history of the Shenango Valley and its people. You will also need to purchase a good grammar book (The Rinehart Guide to Grammar and Usage is an excellent reference tool) and a dictionary such as Webster's Collegiate or The Random House Dictionary. Consult these whenever you get into any trouble.

OBJECTIVES:

There are four objectives for this course.

1. Since this is a composition class, the first objective is to learn to write and to learn to write well.
2. Since this is an advanced composition class, the second objective is for you to go beyond what has been a comfortable level of writing for you in the past, pursuing your own particular interests in a self-directed, responsible way.
3. Since this is also a social science based class, you will be attempting to capture some local history before it is lost forever, a most valuable activity and one which will be a gift, not only to those concerned most immediately, but for succeeding generations.
4. You are to attempt to see yourself as a professional scholar/writer and, as such, you are expected to produce at least one paper that will be considered for our fourth issue of The Present Past. However, you may submit as many papers as you like, as long as they are of publishable quality.

EXAMS:

There are no exams.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE CLASS:

Grades are based on a minimum of three papers of at least five typed pages in length. Extra consideration will be given to those who turn in more than three papers, longer or more heavily researched papers, or those of superior quality. A "C" is an average grade, given for average work. "A" and "B" are reserved for above average writing.

I will work with you individually on any writing problems that you may have. Class members will also help one another become better writers by learning to edit one another's work in non-threatening, positive workshop settings.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:

Attendance is part of your grade and is taken at every class meeting. You are expected to be in class every day, to be on time for class, and to take an active part in class activities and discussions. A full letter grade will be assigned for attendance and participation.

PERSONAL RESOURCE SHEET FOR 202A (WRITING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES), FALL 1992

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

_____ PHONE _____

1. Have you ever been on the writing or editing end of any published project --school newspaper, yearbook, etc.? If so, describe it and your contribution.

2. Have you ever published anything? If so, what and where did it appear?

3. Do you have any particular interests that you might like to expand such as cooking, hunting and camping skills, music, farming, logging, automobiles, trains, architecture, crafts, sewing, weather or planting lore, covered bridges, ethnic social clubs, etc.?

   Any other suggestions?

4. Are you interested in any particular historical topic that we might consider: economic or local business history, African-American history, Native American history, ethnic history, military history, church history, Amish history, labor or union history, medical history, history of landmarks or individual buildings, the mills and their workers, aviation history, etc.?

   Suggestions?

5. Do you have contact with any older members of our community like great-aunts or great-uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, retired people, or any older person whom you (or a fellow class member) could interview? Please list and mention what you think they might be willing to share with us.

6. Do you have access to a tape recorder or a video camera?

7. Do you take or develop photographs? Do you draw or can you make detailed drawings or diagrams to scale?

8. Do you know someone who might come to our class and talk to us about his/her life or demonstrate a craft or perform on a musical instrument, etc.? If so, please list.

9. If we are able to take a field trip or two, what weekday would be best for you?

   What time of day?

   Would you be willing to drive a rented van and are you twenty-one or over?

10. Why did you choose to take this course? What do you want from it?

Note: After publication in The Present Past, all rights revert back to the author.

RELEASE

I hereby grant Penn State University, Shenango Campus, absolute right and permission to publish the below mentioned article(s) in The Present Past.

I also grant Penn State University, Shenango Campus, absolute right and permission to publish any or all photographs or other pictorial materials submitted by me in conjunction with the above mentioned article(s).

It is understood by me that, after production costs have been met, the remaining proceeds from The PResent Past will be used to benefit the Penn State Shenango Campus Scholarship Fund.

I hereby waive any rights that I might have to inspect or approve the finished product or products or the advertising copy or printed matter that may be used in connection therewith or the use to which it may be applied.

I hereby warrant that I have read the above authorization, release, and agreement, prior to its execution, and that I am fully familiar with the contents thereof.

_____
Date

_____
Name

_____
Address

_____

If not of full age:

_____
Name of Father, Mother, or Guardian

_____
Address

_____